Supporting bereaved students at University: balancing institutional standards and reputation alongside individual compassion and care

Abstract

Bereaved university students in the UK are an overlooked population in research, policy and practice. In this paper we examine the implications of this neglect via (1) international literature on bereavement in young people; (2) international literature on bereavement in higher education students; (3) UK and US literature on workplace bereavement and its implications for universities in preparing the future workforce; and (4) findings from a scoping study of 90 UK universities' bereavement support, which identified no shared comprehensive strategy for student bereavement. Our findings show an urgent need for UK universities to address this neglect.

KEY WORDS: bereavement, college students, social support, workplace, culture

Introduction

Balk (2001), in this journal, has described bereaved students as 'hidden grievers', due to their neglect in research, policy and practice. This concealment is compounded by lack of available data on numbers of bereaved full time students within any given academic year, although Balk (2008; 2011) has argued for an estimated figure of 22-30% of US students at any given time. Beyond the US the picture is more opaque; despite considerable evidence documenting the pain, distress, stress and sense of isolation, chaos and unreality that may accompany losing someone close (Taub and Servaty-Seib 2008), virtually nothing is known about how higher education institutions in the UK support students bereaved during or immediately before beginning their studies. This paper examines the implications of this neglect, with reference to the link between Higher Education and the workplace more generally.

As the paper will show, there is significant tension between institutional standards related to discretion for circumstances that may impact on study requirements over the academic year, and the unpredictable and fluid experience of bereavement and grief, which does not neatly fit a conventional illness trajectory. Rather, bereavement involves adapting to a whole host of changes brought about by death, including present relationships, social status, economic circumstances and future plans (Valentine et al, 2016). Given the wide-ranging impact of bereavement it is generally accepted that bereaved people need *time* and *support* to recover. Indeed, given *sufficient* time and appropriate support, bereavement may produce resilience (Bonanno, 2009), personal growth, maturity and well-being (Joseph, 2012; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). In contrast, lack of support and opportunity to confide in sympathetic others may hamper grief, including finding meaning in an experience that may bring considerable pain and upheaval (Neimeyer and Sands, 2011). Moreover, in relation to the transitional and therefore insecure status of students as 'adults in the making' (Smart et al., 2001), they are a vulnerable group. This paper therefore suggests that it is in the interests of universities to ensure bereaved students receive sufficient time and support to grow through their bereavement and continue their studies. The alternative is to risk students withdrawing from their studies through feeling isolated and overwhelmed by grief.

In the absence of research literature and available data, anecdotal examples of the implications of bereavement when studying in higher education provide some insight into the varied practice in the UK and impact of bereavement on young adults. A recent article in the Guardian (Ackerman, 2015) reported one student's experience of failing to find support at her university after her father's death. She did sign up to counselling but had to wait 6 weeks and could only be offered 2 sessions. Following a breakdown during her first-year exams, after bottling up her grief for several months, examiners were unable to take account of her bereavement since it had not occurred within the regulatory one week of exams starting. In

contrast, an earlier Guardian article (Qureshi, 2009) provided a more positive example of a student from another University, who put his coping with bereavement down to both good counselling from the university's student support centre and sharing his grief with a close-knit group of friends. While these two contrasting experiences may have as much to do with the individual student's circumstances as the quality of universities' student support services, they suggest an ad hoc situation rather than coherent strategy or standard across the higher education sector for supporting young adults with an experience that can severely affect their ability to cope with their studies, and carry considerable repercussions for their future prospects.

Young adults are not alone in a dearth of support and guidance. Rather, a lack of knowledge and any nationwide strategy for supporting bereaved young people reflects the incoherence of bereavement policy more generally across the UK more generally (NCPC 2014). Key to this is responsibility for bereavement being split across government departments: the Department of Work and Pensions, Department of Health, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence and Home Office. With no single department taking responsibility for coordinating bereavement policies across Government and reviewing their impact (Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2016), inconsistencies and inadequacies in both statutory and non-statutory provision are inevitable. Studies have already documented wide variation in compassionate leave for bereaved employees (McGuiness, 2009; Corden, 2016); limited and patchy provision of and access to bereavement counselling and support (NCPC 2014) and for different types of bereavement. This is despite bereavement being identified as a major existential challenge (Thompson, 2002), which can have a profound and lasting impact on individuals of all ages.

In relation to bereaved students as a neglected group, such implications are worrying in that these young people are also coping with the challenges of preparing for the workplace and transition to adulthood. Bereavement at this time may be particularly difficult (see for example, Brent et al 2012), US studies of bereaved young people finding that grief negatively affects

concentration and learning, as well as motivation and self-confidence (Balk, 2001; 2003). However, being culturally specific to the US, we do not know how far these findings may apply to the UK. Therefore in reviewing these studies and other findings having bearing on student bereavement we aim to identify the implications of the lack of attention given by UK universities to supporting this group.

Method

Motivated by Balk's work on bereaved college students in the US, the newspaper coverage of individual student's bereavement stories in the UK, the relationship between how UK universities support bereaved students and how employee bereavement is handled in the workplace and lack of UK research, this paper examines four related strands of literature, each having some bearing on particular aspects of the topic. The paper is therefore organised in four parts.

Part 1 of the paper reviews literature on bereavement in young people, a category broadly defined by adolescence and subdivided into early, mid and late adolescence, each assigned its own particular character, shaped by biological changes and developmental challenges (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006). Here we also explore how sociological literature constructs 'youth' as a transitional time when young people's status is defined by institutions and in relation to adults, or as adults in the making (Smart et al., 2001). These transitional and developmental perspectives, which define young people in relation to adulthood, tend to treat these categories and sub-categories of adolescence as universal rather than socially constructed. As a result, few studies have listened to young people's experiences (Brewer and Sparkes, 2010), or considered what helps them cope with and make sense of bereavement.

. Part 2 reviews a small body of international literature, mainly from the US, directly addressing the experiences and needs of bereaved university students. In addition to socio-

cultural differences between the US and elsewhere, including values, structures and practices relating to education and bereavement, this literature is predominantly psychological and developmental in focus. It does not, as this paper argues, address how the individual's personal experience of bereavement is mediated by available socio-cultural scripts, including how bereavement is understood within the higher education system.

Part 3 reviews UK based literature more widely focused on how bereavement is managed in the workplace, which to some extent encompasses universities. However, since students are not employees, their relationships to staff and the institution, including rights and responsibilities on both sides, differ from those of employer and employee. While beyond the scope of this paper to make a detailed comparison of universities and other workplaces, it is relevant to note that marketization of universities in the UK has fuelled a debate about what universities are actually for, that is, the extent to which they serve utilitarian values or the wider good (Collini, 2012).

In Part 4, we discuss findings from a scoping study examining information on bereavement that can be accessed from UK Universities' outward facing websites. Based on a sample of 90 universities (excluding colleges), just over 75% of UK universities, these findings provide an overview of what can be gleaned from these sites about the extent to which and how UK universities are engaging with issues associated with bereavement in young adults.

Analysis and Findings

PART 1: Bereavement in Adolescence

Bereavement in adolescence may be particularly challenging due to coinciding with a stage of life that is in itself beset with transitional challenges. Adolescence, as defined in the psychological literature, refers to the teenage years and how these are shaped by important biological changes, beginning with puberty (Balk 1995). Balk subdivides these years into three

chronological stages, (10-14); middle (15-17) and late adolescence (18-21). As a transitional period characterised by moving from one temporal stage to the next, adolescence has been found to involve specific developmental tasks relating to identify formation and separating from parents, in order to live independently (Balk, 1995). Though Balk to some extent has acknowledged these tasks are culturally-specific, that is, peculiar to western societies and non-western cultures may have different priorities, findings from western studies (see Gillies 2001) have tended to theorise and present these as universal (see Corr and McNeil, 1986).

Sociologically, adolescence is considered to reflect a socially constructed and sustained interval between childhood and adulthood partly due to increased life expectancy in contemporary societies (Corr and McNeil, 1986). The teenage years have been further conceptualised as representing the institutionally-based status of young people or 'youth' as a social category whose members engage with institutions such as family, education and welfare (Wyn and White, 1997). As such, adolescence denotes a transitional period *between* childhood and adulthood. Being neither one nor other it needs to be seen as a relational concept; that is, only having meaning *in relation to* categories of childhood and adulthood. In other words, young people are in a state of leaving childhood and 'becoming' in relation to adults, who have 'arrived'.

With regard to bereavement in adolescence, its impact has been theorised with reference to the above concepts of development, transition, 'becoming' and institutional engagement. Psychological approaches, based on adolescence as a developmental phase, have raised questions as to whether bereavement during this time is particularly problematic, as it represents a further stress that may interfere with cognitive and developmental tasks. For example, needing support at a time of developing and demonstrating independence may pose considerable conflict for bereaved adolescents (Balk 1995). Sociological approaches based on the concept of 'youth' as a social transition similarly raise questions about bereavement being

a 'risk factor' that may interfere with the status of becoming by exposing young people to the impact of death too soon (Gilles 2001). Thus, while having received less attention from sociologists, from both perspectives bereavement appears to pose a threat to adolescent development with potentially negative consequences for psycho-social well-being, skills and competencies both in the immediate and longer term. However, despite potential detrimental consequences, if integrated meaningfully into a student's life story, bereavement can foster personal growth (Neimeyer, 2008), including developing a more compassionate appreciation of one's human condition.

In relation to bereavement at university, detrimental consequences concern both a student's academic and vocational prospects as well as psycho-social well-being. Indeed, developmental tasks of emerging adulthood intersect with a campus environment that may not support what bereaved students need to cope with death and manage their studies (Servaty-Seib and Cupit, 2015). Yet, there is evidence to suggest that bereavement in adolescence may have a *positive* impact on development, depending on the individual's maturity and coping strategies prior to the death and the support they receive while grieving (Robin and Omar, 2014). Importantly however, the dominance of psychological, developmental and somewhat reductionist approaches to theorising bereavement more generally, as well as applied to young people more specifically, may obscure a fuller and more complex picture of bereavement, including its diversity and interaction with other aspects of life (Thompson, 2002; Valentine, 2008). Rather, understanding bereavement in adolescence can only be captured through drawing on a range of disciplines, perspectives and approaches. One fruitful example is Thompson's model (2002) for analysis of well-being that takes into account the different dimensions of personal, cultural and structural contexts, or 'PCS framework', to gain a more comprehensive picture of both resources that may enhance and stressors that may undermine a person's well-being, and how these contexts may interact with each other. Such a framework

may help to explain why similar bereavements may evoke contradictory responses from two different individuals, suggesting that whether or not a particular bereavement becomes a crisis for a person may have more to do with its timing in relation to other difficult experiences, or the cultural context they work, than anything universal about the bereavement per se. Thus, for one person, bereavement may represent the last straw at a time when other difficulties are being experienced (Thompson, 2002), increasing vulnerability to poor well-being and health while already 'at risk' due to other factors. Another example may be that a student is bereaved while studying in an institutional setting that prioritises student well-being and has a well-established, supportive administrative structure, whereby policies and staff enable students to feel recognised and supported to find a balance between dealing with their grief and managing their studies.

While understanding life experiences within such contexts, what has also tended to be neglected in developmental studies overall however is the young adult's perspective, that is, their side of the story obtained from qualitative, open-ended interviewing without imposing the researchers' categories. In terms of understanding bereavement, qualitative studies enable a focus on bereavement as it occurs within pre-existing and ongoing social contexts (Ribbens-McCarthy 2006) to highlight factors less likely to emerge from quantitative approaches in which bereaved people's responses to questionnaires based on researchers' categories have provided statistical data from which generalised symptomatologies of grief have been developed. The few studies that have been undertaken to prioritise reported experiences of young adults have highlighted a number of key themes. These include the search for meaning in the death (Niemeyer, 2001); the deaths of friends and more distant relatives as well as immediate family members being particularly significant in young people's lives (see Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006; Valentine, 2008); young people being vulnerable to isolation and a sense of being different (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2007); and *time* being significant in terms of how grief is

experienced within the life course, something that retrospective accounts of bereavement during one's teenage years can capture (Valentine 2008). These accounts have further shown how grief may re-emerge over time at significant points in later life (Pennells and Smith, 1996).

To elaborate on these themes, the search for meaning when bereaved may include revising values and priorities, for example, increased sensitivity to and appreciation of others and of one's own life, particularly following the untimely death of another young person, such as a friend or sibling (Valentine, 2008). With regard to the potentially isolating impact of bereavement (Martinson and Campos, 1991), peer support has been found to be particularly valuable for bereaved young people (Cowie 1999; Johnson 2002). Indeed there is evidence to suggest that peer support groups for bereavement are a valuable intervention in that they may enhance resilience (Newman 2002) and help overcome isolation (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). Otherwise, being unable to talk to others may lead to secondary losses, such as the breakdown of friendships, or in cases of parental death the remaining parent being inaccessible and consequent sense of isolation and difference that may become long term (Pennells and Smith 1996). For example, a young person's communication may be hampered by not knowing how to convey overwhelming and unknown feelings, or not wanting to upset others (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006). Moreover, support from peers may only be forthcoming if those peers have been through similar experience (Wolfelt, 2007). Certainly, Balk (2008) has identified isolation and difficulties with communication and sharing bereavement experiences with peers in his studies of US college students, and in light of the Guardian (Ackerman, 2015) article, the relevance of this finding to students' experiences within UK universities requires further exploration.

PART 2: The Impact of Bereavement on young adults studying at university

In studying bereavement in US college students, Balk (2008) has identified how grief may affect six areas of student life. These are: *physical*, for example, sleep problems (Hardison, Neimeyer and Lichstein 2005); *behavioural*, including managing time and meeting deadlines (Balk and Vesta 1998); *interpersonal*, such as others not understanding or wanting to hear about one's grief (Balk 2008); *cognitive*, or difficulties concentrating and remembering, which may affect academic performance and grades (Servaty-Seib and Hamilton 2006); *emotional*, or coping with intensely painful emotions (Balk 2008) and sudden, unpredictable outbursts of crying; and *spiritual*, or searching for answers to existential questions (Attig 1996, Balk 2011: 233). While not unique to bereaved college students, the meaning and impact of these responses reflect a unique set of issues related to living away from family, forming a sense of identity and adjusting to full time study and university life (Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum 2015), including institutional expectations, pressures, resources and constraints - ideological and structural. With an emphasis on achievement and performance, and a campus culture of fun, these issues may make it difficult for young adults to talk about their loss, leading to a sense of isolation, different-ness and a pressure to pretend that everything is OK (Servaty-Seib and Taub, 2008).

Encouragingly, a few pilot studies (see for example Tyson-Rawson and Colletti-Wetzel 1993) have evaluated support for bereaved students provided by student counselling centres, with tentatively positive outcomes for students' lives. However, elsewhere it has been found that bereaved students' seeking counselling support or pastoral care is the exception rather than the rule (Balk, 2001). Rather counselling is often viewed as a sign that they are not coping and need mental health support, thus running the risk of being stigmatised (Balk 2001). Students may also feel unable to share their bereavement with peers (Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum, 2015, 1996), experiencing them as unsympathetic, even hostile. For this reason bereaved students may not fully disclose the impact of bereavement to tutors or student support services.

As a result, bereaved students may suffer in silence to the extent of leading a double life (Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum 2015).

However, such resistance to disclosure does not mean students do not respond to or reject more informal social support, such as talking to interested peers or staff (Balk 2008). In addition, student-led initiatives at some Universities, such as Western Sydney in Australia (Cusik 2007) and Georgetown in the US (Balk 2008; Fajgen-baum and Chesson 2007), have raised awareness of student bereavement and produced structured, co-ordinated protocols for responding to the needs of bereaved students. Balk (2001) makes the important point that these system-wide approaches frame bereavement support within the university's central mission. That is, the institution publicly commits to responding sensitively and appropriately when life crises obstruct individuals from engaging in the academic and scholarly activities that are core to university life.

Given the reluctance to seek support and typical low profile of bereavement within higher education settings, it is unsurprising that students have been described as hidden grievers (Balk 2001), their grief disenfranchised (Doka 1989). Importantly, in an educational context where the institution's focus is on standardised and equitable treatment of students and fair practice (see PART 3), the impact of bereavement on cognitive capacity described above can undermine academic success and ultimately the student's ability to persist in their studies and accomplish their goal of graduation, thereby affecting future employment prospects. Balk (2008) has thus recommended a two pronged approach to supporting bereaved students: to educate the university campus community as a whole about bereavement, and support individual bereaved students to manage their grief.

In terms of educating university communities findings on psychological and behavioural effects of bereavement on US college students are likely to be relevant to

university students in the UK. However, this is not necessarily the case for the wider social and UK educational institutional context, including structures, practices, processes and procedures, which have been little researched. Indeed, as Balk (2008) has acknowledged, there is a paucity of research on how universities as institutions respond to bereaved students, including what systems are in place, whether and how these are working/used by students, and whether there has been any attempt to assess students' needs. In the context of UK higher education, these contextual and structural aspects are important in framing not only any available support provision but also the extent to which students feel capable of accessing support. Furthermore, Balk's arguments are culturally-specific, in that US based research cannot be automatically translated to a UK context. For example, while US initiatives that are student-led and/or system-wide and frame bereavement support within a university's mission statement are worthy examples of what can be achieved, any UK-based initiatives must take account of the UK university system and related organisational needs, priorities and pressures if they are to provide support that is accessible and effective.

PART: Bereavement in the Workplace

The dearth of insight into institutional responses to young adult bereavement while studying at university is not isolated; how employment organisations manage staff bereavement has been little researched despite the range of issues involved, such as the extent of employer responsibility for supporting bereaved workers, financial impacts on both parties, business impact and productivity, employee job security/prospects and health issues and so on. In the paucity of work that does exist, recent attention given to bereavement in the workplace by McGuiness (2009) has found that bereavement is likely to affect around 10% of the UK work force each year; UK employees have a statutory entitlement to 'reasonable' unpaid time off to deal with the death of a dependent, though it is up to the employer to autonomously determine what is 'reasonable'; and there is wide variation in compassionate leave provision

for bereaved employees. Otherwise, employees' experiences of bereavement in the workplace can only be gleaned from studies focusing on specific kinds of bereavement rather than the workplace as the primary focus (Corden, 2016).

Taking time off: Since compassionate leave in the UK is discretionary there is wide variation in people's experiences of negotiating such leave (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006), which is intended to cover arranging and attending the funeral. Such discretion does not always take into account the severity of the bereavement, whether due to the closeness of the relationship with the deceased or the nature of the death itself (Casey, 2011; Hall et al., 2013). Rather, how bereaved employees are treated relies on the employer's empathy and understanding.

Though students are not employees their position within the university institution is comparable, with taking time off from studies following bereavement similarly being subject to discretionary compassionate leave. As in the workplace, the extent of support following bereavement will depend on the empathy and understanding of individual university staff, as well as (for example) specific assessment regulations. These vary from university to university, for example, when and for how long compassionate leave may be taken (See PART 4). The timing of the bereavement has relevance in that needing time off is likely to be more problematic during examination and assessment periods. However, with no collated data or standardised support/guidance, we do not know how far UK universities are prepared to extend time frames for completing assessed work or re-sitting exams due to bereavement (rather than illness), and anticipate considerable variation. For example, for the bereaved student whose story was published in the Guardian Newspaper, compassionate leave was rigidly tied to the period immediately following her father's death and therefore could not be applied several months later when she *actually* needed it to enable her to re-sit her exams. Thus, at an institutional level, since bereavement is a varied experience, particularly in the manner of death and relationship between bereaved and deceased, we can assume that how universities

implement compassionate leave to accommodate bereaved students will depend on senior management's perception and understanding of the impact bereavement may have on students. However, to date such institutionalised understanding and its origins remains unknown.

Nonetheless, institutions are responsible for ensuring their students are given ample opportunity to perform to the best of their capacity. Similar to supporting the workforce, there is a good business as well as moral case for institutions to create and implement a well-designed bereavement policy (see Corden, 2016), as advocated within guidance produced by the Advisory, Conciliatory and Arbitration Service (ACAS, 2014). Though supporting bereaved staff involves time and resources, without such investment in university or workplace bereavement policy business costs are likely to increase due to lower productivity, decreased staff/student well-being, cohesion and morale, increased stress-related absenteeism and recruitment costs to fill gaps (Corden, 2016). For universities supporting bereaved students, investing in time and resources makes good business sense, particularly now UK universities are effectively businesses, competing for students and ensuring their retention once through the doors.

Certainly, UK employers have a common law duty of care to employees requiring them to take all reasonable steps to ensure their health, safety and wellbeing. Universities too have a duty of care to students, though the legal relationship between universities and students has changed considerably over the last 20 years (Jamdar 2015). In addition to moving away from the paternalistic 'in loco parentis' model, following lowering of the age of majority from 21 to 18 in 1970, other factors include the introduction of the Human Rights Act, ratified by the UK in 1989; variable deferred tuition fees; the establishment of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA); and the extension of consumer protection legislation over university offers. As a result, students are legally speaking both human beings with rights to being treated with

fairness, dignity and respect, *and* consumers of higher education with expectations of information, quality of service and value for money (Tomlinson, 2017).

Regardless of the appropriateness of the consumer model, it has been noted that in adapting to such a model institutions are likely to be *more* concerned about adhering to their duty of care to their consumers, the students (Wilson and Brunner, 2010). The lack of a coherent response to bereavement (see Part 4) contradicts this however. Moreover, despite no longer acting in loco parentis, a university's duty of care arguably goes further than a typical employers' common law duty, as it includes both a general duty to safeguard and promote students' health and welfare, as well as an enhanced duty of care for particular groups of vulnerable students. These vulnerable students include, for example, those under 18 years old; international students; students with mental health issues; disabled students and those with medical conditions; and minority groups vulnerable to harassment and so on. Certainly, bereaved students could conceivably fall within this category. To assist university staff in fulfilling this duty of care to all students, but particularly those falling into the vulnerable category, Universities UK has produced a number of policy documents, information statements and good practice guidelines, for example, the *Student mental well-being in higher education: good practice guide* (2015). More practically speaking, most university institutions provide students with a named personal tutor, as well as student service departments and pastoral care. While student services vary between institutions they generally include on-site accommodation/resident tutors, well-being advisors and, in some cases, counselling services and support groups focused on specific issues (see Part 4). However, as discussed further in Part 4, we do not know whether this duty of care addresses the needs of bereaved students as a specific group requiring attention.

This lack of a standard approach to bereaved students means that, as noted earlier, institutional responses are likely to depend on how grief and bereavement is understood in the

context of any said university's perceived responsibilities for health and welfare and mental well-being. Indeed, bereavement may not be conceptualised by an institution as a mental health issue at all. While psychological approaches to bereavement tend to use medical, particularly mental health terminology (see for example, Bandini, 2013; Faschingbauer et al. 1977), bereavement and resulting grief is *not* a disease though in some cases following a bereavement mental health issues may ensue (Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe, 2007). However, there is the potential for confusing bereavement and mental health issues, particularly via depression, which may accompany grieving. This situation has implications for providing appropriate support. For example, a bereaved student may not necessarily disclose bereavement when seeking counselling support. Therefore, if such support is to be effective in such cases, developing appropriate screening questions would be crucial to identifying as clearly as possible what a student may be struggling with.

Managing grief: Evidence from the US suggests employees' grief is disenfranchised (Doka, 1989) in being perceived as inappropriate in a context emphasising productivity and high morale (Bento, 1994). This has been found to produce 'stifled grief' or grief denied its full course (Eyetsemitan 2010), and includes allowing limited time off for funerals, bereaved employees expected to resume full-blown responsibilities immediately after their return to work. Any further time off tends to prioritise family relationships rather than take account of the strength of emotional attachment to the deceased, for example, close friends. Since, as indicated, US evidence suggests students' grief is similarly disenfranchised, the question arises as to whether such a widespread response reflects cultural norms emphasising workplace aspiration and achievement over empathy and discretion.

Certainly, Balk (2011) has identified how US universities, while uniquely positioned to provide support for bereaved students, fail to understand the emotional and cognitive turmoil bereavement may bring. Balk places such turmoil in the context of demands on students to

excel academically at the same time as participate in extracurricular and social activities, as well as needing to take on part-time employment to fund their education. Such a context is not conducive to sharing grief with peers who may not necessarily be receptive. Thus it seems likely that the university context may also result in stifled grief, which, unfortunately may inhibit the constructive potential of grief and developing resilience, empathy and greater appreciation of life (Attig 1996).

Longer term implications: The challenge bereavement may pose to one's assumptive world (Parkes, 2008) includes both external and internal adjustments, each inevitably affecting the other. For bereaved students at university such a challenge may feel particularly precarious given the pre-existing challenges involved in adapting to the demands/expectations of university life, as previously discussed. Indeed, bereaved students are effectively up against what are considered to be two major life transitions simultaneously; their associated risks and possibilities (Brent et al, 2012). Thus late adolescence, psychologically speaking, has been theorised as a time of status transition from child to adulthood, when one's goals and sense of identity and direction are pivotal, though still forming (McFerren et al, 2010). The impact of bereavement at this time can therefore be particularly disruptive. Moreover, any loss of energy and motivation may be difficult to accommodate within institutional and inflexible study and assessment schedules. As a result, any time taken off for a bereavement will involve needing to catch up later, adding to the sense of pressure and anxiety. However, as with workplace bereavement, longer term outcomes for students can be both negative *and* positive and, in both cases, are dependent on the extent to which bereavement is accommodated by the institution (Balk, 2008).

PART 4: Scoping Study

Having outlined both what is known from related areas of study and gaps that remain in understanding the impact of and support for students bereaved while in higher education, this section reports on a scoping exercise conducted by the authors to map the current situation of university bereavement support in the UK, including what support was available, how it could be accessed and what gaps remained. Drawing on the Gov.uk list of 'Recognised Universities', a search of outward facing websites of 90 UK universities out of a total of 130 found a mixed picture of both information related to bereavement support provision and access to this information[i]. The information itself and user-friendliness of the websites varied considerably. The picture that emerged was of 1 university with dedicated bereavement support, 21 universities providing links to in-house bereavement resources, 18 relying on links to outside resources, 26 with bereavement support provided by the counselling service (6 of which also overlapped with the previous category) and 30 with no mention of bereavement on their websites.

Accessing information on bereavement support was by no means straightforward; simply typing 'bereavement' or 'bereavement support' into the institution's search engine only yielded information on research or study related to bereavement/bereavement support. Rather, accessing such information involved following links from student services (a starting point not necessarily obvious to relatively new students) to health and wellbeing and/or counselling and, in some cases, the Chaplaincy Centre. Some links did not work and student services links for two universities were not accessible to the public. Some health and well-being and counselling sites provided links to self-help resources with further links to external resources, including bereavement sites, mostly the national bereavement charity Cruse. Some counselling sites included bereavement in a list of issues for which counselling might help. Chaplaincy services in general seldom mentioned bereavement, though the sole example of dedicated bereavement

support within the sample was found on a university's Chaplaincy Centre site (see Appendix for Table of results).

Of the institutions providing links to bereavement information, several included a link to Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (Sobs), possibly reflecting incidents of student suicide affecting specific universities. Indeed, one university's general bereavement guidance page provided a link to a page on 'coping with sudden death' in response to a specific incident. Few universities provided their own in-house bereavement self-help leaflet but rather used information from or referrals to other sources. There was no information amounting to a comprehensive self-help guide for students dealing with bereavement, that is, with detailed self-help advice; details of internal and external resources, including support services and how to access these; and how the university, faculties and departments, and their representatives, would respond to the needs of bereaved students, particularly the impact on a student's studies.

The findings from the scoping study are summarised as follows:

1. Bereavement may be catered for as part of general counselling services at those universities that have such services, these amounting to just over half those sampled. Bereavement was listed as one of a range of 'common problems' that might warrant counselling, in one case (referred to above) being listed as 'coping with sudden death'. 3 services also listed support groups, which included bereavement groups.
2. Access to general counselling information was usually via student services, but in a few cases the link was on the Chaplaincy webpage.
3. Links to external sources were mostly to the bereavement charity Cruse, in a few cases including the Cruse 'homeagain' site for young people. In some cases there were links to suicide sites, such as Sobs and Insight (in Scotland). In a few cases there were links to The

Compassionate Friends (TCF), Winston's Wish and to another University's bereavement webpage.

4. A few institutions provided access to in-house self-help leaflets, booklets and webpages on 'Grief and Loss'. In one case, there was both a bereavement leaflet and a video of a student's personal experience of bereavement and how the university had provided support. 9 universities provided dedicated bereavement webpages, 1 provided a bereavement booklet and I included bereavement information in the student handbook.
5. There was one case of dedicated bereavement support being provided by the Chaplaincy Centre. However, in another case, while there was a link from a bereavement page to the Chaplaincy Centre page, there was no mention of bereavement on that page.
6. What was missing from *all* sites was any reference to how far the institution was prepared to accommodate bereaved students within their regulations for teaching and assessment.

From the material made available on university websites, there are clearly gaps in publicly accessible information that need to be addressed in supporting bereaved students. Present guidance appears inconsistent and incomplete, and focuses solely on individual grieving rather than the griever's social/cultural and practical context. As a result, and corresponding with the literature on hidden grieving cited earlier, such guidance is more likely to exacerbate the concealment of bereavement for those students who feel unable to share their grief with their peers. In addition, none of the available guides address students' inevitable fears about their grief disrupting or damaging their studies and ultimately their hopes for graduating. Such fears may be partially addressed through counselling, though not all universities have counselling services (little more than half, as indicated). However, given the current academic climate/system, where there is little flexibility for taking time out, a multi-faceted solution may be warranted, that is, a strategy including practical measures alongside emotional support to accommodate both the needs of bereaved students and demands of the

university system (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006). As indicated, students may grow through grief, but grieving takes time and energy, which if not accommodated may instead run the risk of students suffering in silence (Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum 2015). Also none of the present guidance extends to university staff and how they are expected to respond to bereaved students.

Discussion

In reviewing what is known of the impact bereavement in adolescence and university students specifically, together with workplace responses to bereaved employees and, in the case of universities, bereaved students, we have identified a markedly under-researched and under-recognised area of concern. Findings from the US suggest that, depending on appropriate support, including from peers, bereavement at this transitional time may either severely compromise students' future prospects or lead to resilience, personal growth and maturity. Yet, despite such findings, no UK research has considered the impact of or institutional response to bereavement on university students. As a result and confirmed by our scoping study, sources of guidance on handling bereavement are limited to those provided by ACAS and there is a distinct lack of validation by universities when it comes to identifying the impact of bereavement on students. This is the case for both individual students and their institution, which in turn impacts the support available to the individual and those others affected, and to enable them to continue, be productive, and reach their full potential.

As this paper has shown with a poor existing bereavement culture, responses from institutions to bereaved individuals rely heavily on guidance, empathy and discretion of staff/colleagues, and the extent to which senior management recognise the potential effects of bereavement. The inadequacy of coherent and consistent bereavement and compassionate leave policy is thus a nationwide problem in the UK, affecting young and older adults alike. What is different with young adults in higher education however is their relationship to their institution.

First and foremost, they occupy a transitional space between childhood and mature adulthood, being legally adults but lacking the life experience or knowledge to engage with the implications and impact of a close bereavement. Left to their own devices therefore they are likely to be vulnerable to under or over-reaction, either attempting to carry on as 'usual' or being unable to carry on at all, or, as in the cited Guardian article (Ackerman, 2015) both - that is, carrying on as usual eventually precipitating a mental/emotional breakdown in the student.

Second, in the UK, young adult students are fee-paying 'customers' of an institution rather than paid employees. Therefore, the institution has a clearly defined responsibility to ensure services are in place to enable them to study to the best of their potential. As the PART 4 scoping study showed however, services to support bereaved students are incoherent at best and invisible or unavailable at worst. Moreover, universities have an extended duty of care beyond employers to support their student population, including safeguarding and promoting the health and welfare of students more generally and an enhanced duty to more vulnerable student groups. While the response to support provision for mental health issues has been promising, bereavement support has received no such attention. Since bereavement is not a mental health issue we would argue that it would *not* be appropriate or helpful for bereavement support to be subsumed under mental health. Nonetheless, bereavement may have considerable impact on health and well-being and, as such should surely invoke the same level of duty of care and safeguarding as mental health.

Third, bereaved university students are studying in institutionalised settings governed by fair practice, internally and externally monitored to maintain the standards and reputation of the institution and higher education sector more broadly (Collini, 2012). Underpinned by operational regulations, these are the mechanisms holding universities to account, demonstrating value for money and societal worth. They are also the means through which discretion for students in times of need is managed.

While these regulations will have get-out clauses in place for acute illness that can impact a student's performance, bereavement is much more complex and long-term and can affect a young adult mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, practically and financially. Thus how an institution responds and accommodates a young person bereaved during or just before their university studies commenced is critical to their ability to perform and their experience of education overall. Moreover, given the transitional identity of university students, institutional responses to bereavement are particularly important in establishing, validating and promoting the acceptability of bereavement as both a personal experience and social issue beyond the university. If institutions encourage the concealment of bereavement and grief, they are contributing to its marginalisation in public discourse.

Conclusion

Clearly there is urgent need to address this neglected area, relating to three important factors having emerged from our review and reflecting students' transitional status. First, bereaved students as adults in the making are vulnerable to the more negative, disruptive aspects of bereavement yet open to its more positive, developmental potential, depending on how universities support them. Second, students share similar characteristics to a workforce but with distinct differences in the relationship between students and their institution and expectations and responsibilities on both sides. Third, how universities respond to bereaved students as a transitional population sets up how bereavement is validated and recognised/concealed in the workforce. Universities, we therefore argue, have a responsibility to establish good practice in dealing with student bereavement. Indeed, HE's key role in preparing students to become the next generation of the workforce, positions the sector to *lead the way* in establishing institutional norms, setting standards and sharing best practice for how to respond and accommodate bereavement in the workforce/workplace.

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[i] Since we do not know extent to which the information available on outward facing websites actually reflect how a university supports bereaved students, these data are limited. Nonetheless, we would argue that they do provide some indication of the place accorded the provision of bereavement support within the goals and values that universities are trying to promote through these sites in order to enhance recruitment and reputation. As such they provide a useful starting point for a fuller investigation of individual universities.